

# Special Section Article

NATALIE MORNINGSTAR

## Bad parrhesia: the limits of cynicism in the public sphere

This paper examines the limits of Cynical parrhesia. Based on fieldwork with artist-activists in post-recession Dublin, I recount their fraught efforts to use adventurous artistic expression to provoke a critical awakening in an audience of strangers, who instead respond with derision. My focus is thus on a narrow but prevalent feature of artists' work and lives, and the public's experience of challenging genres of provocative public criticism: the encounter with unintelligibility and alienation in the public sphere. I thus deploy 'bad parrhesia' as a tool through which to consider the factors that mitigate against artists establishing the desired critical relationship with audiences. Nevertheless, though these parrhesiastic encounters do not succeed, I argue that they do not yield an absence of social relations but relations of an anti-social kind. Departing from readings of parrhesia as a form of individualism, corrosive to relationality, or a playful reaction against the failures of liberal democratic politics, I make a case for framing parrhesia as a relationship of contestation over which kinds of public criticism are judged to be intelligible and valuable responses to moments of cultural crisis in northern liberal democracies.

**Key words** parrhesia, art, cynicism, liberal democracy, critique

### The Fish Bowl

Seomra 2 was a mainstay pub in Mount Stevens. Dingy and serving a selection of only the most familiar beers, it flouted the trend of replacing such venues with chic cocktail bars and coffee houses. Located in a part of Dublin dense with controversial social housing regenerations, the neighbourhood had – until recently – been off city planners' radar. The pub nevertheless had a devoted local following, who would gather there for quiz nights, lunches and performances from local musicians.

Tonight, they were in for a surprise. A neighbour was throwing a party on the weekly music night, but instead of the more common rock-trad-pop cover combo, the group was greeted by a troupe of experimental theatre performers. No one in the pub knew anyone in the group, who went by the name 'The Fish Bowl'. When the performers emerged on stage, they were greeted by a mix of curious silence and good-humoured jeering from the fairly intoxicated crowd. The actors, dressed in metallic spandex suits, persevered and began reciting a collection of obtuse, spoken word poetry. Halfway through the show, one artist pulled a fishnet out of a bag and placed it on his head before dancing to the off-key accompaniment of a fellow performer.

By this point, the crowd was uncontainable. People were shouting jokes at the stage, and for days afterwards those in attendance exchanged their most amusing video clips and images of what most agreed had been a bewildering performance. A friend, Heather, was seated at a table at the back of the pub next to her neighbour, Alan. When

the group finally retreated from the stage, he turned to Heather and said, in audible undertones, 'I think they misjudged their target audience.' Heather, head in hand, muttered, 'maybe we're not *cultured* enough, but that was hilariously bad'.

Based on 12 months of fieldwork with young artist-activists in Dublin, Ireland from 2016 to 2017, this paper recounts moments in which artists' work produces confusion or censure. While artists and their artwork elsewhere invite more generative reactions, they are also often met with bafflement, frustration and ridicule. This paper therefore examines the reasonably frequent – but not altogether desired – consequences of artists engaging in adventurous artistic expression in public spaces. My focus is on the relationship that emerges between artist and audience when artists produce work intended to galvanise urban strangers, who instead respond with derision.

My conceptual entry point is a Foucauldian reading of parrhesia, the 'obligation' to speak or manifest risky truths to others (Foucault 2019: 5). Drawing on Foucault's theorisation of the artist as modern Cynic, and his reflections on the association between Cynicism and parrhesia, I argue that Cynical parrhesia is a helpful tool for understanding the relationship artists hope to establish with audiences, as well as why audiences refuse it. At the heart of Cynicism, Foucault writes, is a commitment to staging 'practical scandals' (2019: 172) in public and to maintaining 'a polemical attitude' (2019: 150) *vis-à-vis* social conventions and political institutions. Owing to a recent realignment between the arts and urban development policies in Dublin, a Cynical stance has become increasingly attractive to artists, who worry the critical function of art has been instrumentalised as a source of wealth-creation and fuelled exclusionary processes of urban regeneration. Yet artists' provocative public displays are not always understood or valued by audiences, with whom artists may not have a pre-established critical relationship. While artists view themselves as courageous provocateurs, for uninitiated audiences, artists are often perceived to be humorously pretentious. They are understood to have benefited from a privileged position as pedestalled cultural critics, but to have wasted their energy on esoteric forms of artistic expression at the expense of establishing mutual understanding. The commitment to Cynical parrhesia thus presents a paradox: it is *both* central to the cultivation of artists' critical attitude *and* a barrier to establishing the type of social relations necessary to successfully navigate the parrhesiastic encounter.

This paper thus draws together Foucault's theorisation of the artist as Cynical parrhesiast, and his reflections on parrhesia in the democratic city, to highlight the factors that can impede collective critical engagement in the public sphere. It argues that artists do not always achieve two key prerequisites for 'good' parrhesiastic expression: a carefully navigated relationship, and a shared value and understanding of critique. In this sense, my argument builds on philosophical accounts of 'bad parrhesia' (Marar 2014) and anthropological analyses of parrhesia, Cynicism and liberal democracy (Englund 2018; Boyer 2013) to examine what we learn from instances in which judgements regarding what counts as good parrhesia are *not* shared. To situate this paper in this Special Section, this analysis trains an ethnographic spotlight on the 'morphology' of values undergirding the parrhesiastic relationship and the 'grammar' that orders the parrhesiastic game (Fedirko et al. 2021). Rather than understanding parrhesia as a manifestation of liberal individualism (Englund 2018) or a reaction against liberalism's ironies (Boyer 2013), this analysis argues that 'good' parrhesia is a relation predicated on the parrhesiast's ability to uphold the apparently contradictory values of truth-telling and mutual understanding, a relation that the interlocutor can refuse where there is not

a shared understanding or value of the parrhesiast's brand of critique. I focus on failed parrhesiastic encounters for what they reveal – in the negative – about the rules that structure successful critical engagement in the public sphere.

That being said, while the parrhesiastic bond is not established in these cases, I argue that a relationship of an 'anti-social' (Højer 2019, 2004) kind is indeed forged. Taking a cue from efforts to re-centre non-Durkheimian forms of 'anti-social' (Højer 2019, 2004) relationality (Candea et al. 2015; Coleman 2009), I deploy 'bad parrhesia' as an avenue onto considering what relationality looks like after trust has been breached and mutual intelligibility thrown into question. Consistent with this literature, I argue that anti-social relations are relations nonetheless, with active social effects. In this case, the anti-social relations that simmer following the failed parrhesiastic encounter foreground overlooked disagreement regarding what constitutes worthwhile criticism in the liberal democratic public sphere.

## Situating 'bad' parrhesia and anti-social relationality

It is worth revisiting Foucault's account of the relationship between parrhesia and critique in the democratic city, and between Cynicism and modern art, in order to ground the relationship I am tracing between Cynical parrhesia and contemporary artistic production in Dublin. First, I'll examine Foucault's (2019, 2011) analysis of parrhesia and its contemporary offshoots and explore how Højer's (2019, 2004) 'anti-social contract' offers a productive vantage onto anthropological debates about parrhesia, Cynicism and liberal democracy. I will then discuss why, considering the realignment between contemporary art and post-recession urban development policies in Dublin, Cynical parrhesia is an attractive stance for critically minded artists, even when it fails to rouse target audiences.

Parrhesia is a notion that emerges in antiquity as a form of risky political criticism, of the citizen *vis-à-vis* the democratic majority, and of the councillor *vis-à-vis* the prince. Foucault was interested in the kinship between parrhesia and critique (2019: 43), and the genealogical correlation between forms of parrhesiastic expression in the ancient world, in Christian spiritualism and in modern practices of 'telling the truth about oneself' in the role of patient or penitent (2011: 8). Across its historical iterations, 'good' parrhesia is characterised by certain common features: it is (a) a virtue, (b) a technique and (c) a relationship. That is to say, (a) it emanates from a 'duty' (2019: 45) to the truth, meaning it is opposed to the theatrical dissimulations of 'flattery' (2019: 19) or 'rhetoric' (2019: 21). Because it is a risky form of truth-telling, (b) it requires that the parrhesiast know the right 'circumstances' in which to speak (2019: 23). Finally, (c) it is an unsettled 'game' (2019: 24) in which the interlocutor has the power to refuse the parrhesiastic agreement. Thus, a requirement of the parrhesiastic relationship is that there is 'similitude in the choice of existence' between both parties (2019: 29) – what Ziyad Marar (2014) calls 'mutual understanding' of the rules of the game and its value. If these criteria are not met, we have 'bad' parrhesia: 'saying anything one has in mind ... without taking care' (Foucault 2019: 41). Thus, parrhesia isn't any kind of risky expression; it has to be unalloyed and well executed, and the relationship between parrhesiast and interlocutor must be carefully navigated – precisely because it is at risk. Moreover, while Foucault notes that the parrhesiast is 'in a position of inferiority to the interlocutor' (2019: 44), he is also clear that only those of high 'social status'

have historically been judged capable of parrhesia (2019: 118). As he writes of ancient parrhesia: it 'is not a right equally given to any citizen, but only to some, who are specially prestigious' (2019: 92). What made parrhesia powerful was that it was a form of risky expression through which high status persons could influence those in power in 'the interest of the city' (2019: 113). Parrhesia thus cuts to the heart of a 'discrepancy' Foucault identifies in democratic politics: between the 'egalitarian' ideal that posits that anyone is capable of expressing the truth, and the reality that a select few are often judged capable of truth-telling (2019: 113).

For Foucault, the paradigmatic example of the parrhesiastic skill was ancient Cynicism. The Cynics are particularly relevant here, as they often tested the thin boundary between 'good' and 'bad' parrhesia. Cynicism thus helps us understand instances in which parrhesia is judged to have failed. Moreover, it is in discussions of Cynicism that Foucault explicitly deals with the relationship between parrhesia and democracy, and between parrhesia and modern art. The Cynics were active from the fifth century BC, though varieties of Cynicism have re-emerged in several historical contexts since. They occupied an ambiguous role in ancient society: both ridiculed and sought after by the elite, they proffered polemical, popularly accessible critique, in the form of public preaching, combative dialogue and scandalous behaviour (Foucault 2019: 169). They aggressively championed truth and frankness but lambasted luxury, hypocrisy and sophistry. Cynicism is thus often described as a reaction against the failure of high Greek philosophy and its linkages with 'the decadence of the political structures of the ancient world' (2019: 166). An iconoclastic mode of existence, it was defined by an emphasis on practice over doctrine, by an antinomian, 'scandalous attitude' *vis-à-vis* social mores, and by a commitment to manifesting 'essential truths' via forms of 'visible, spectacular provocation' (2019: 167).

In this respect, Foucault (2011) posited that ancient Cynicism is an antecedent to the 'anti-cultural function' (2011: 189) of modern art. As he notes, the historical figure of the Cynic as eccentric critic is recapitulated in the expectation, dominant since the Renaissance, that the artist live 'a singular life, which is not entirely reducible to the usual dimensions and norms' (2011: 187). Indeed, it was this quality of the artistic life that led Simmel to describe artists as structural 'outsiders', distinctive figures whose lives and work are marked by a refusal of 'intelligibility' (2011: 190) and a commitment to making 'a system out of life's lack of system' (2011: 191). Similarly, there is an affinity between the ancient understanding of parrhesia as unmediated truth-telling and the 'modern idea that the artist's life, in the very form it takes, should constitute some kind of testimony of what art is in its truth' (2011: 187). Foucault's thesis is consistent with art historical accounts, which have emphasised the antagonistic, anti-cultural thrust of many 20th-century European artistic and avant-garde movements (Bishop 2012: 78). From Dadaism to Surrealism to Situationism, some of the core precepts of Cynicism have surfaced in the modern period: a positive value has been attributed to art that inverts social mores, scandalises its audience or tests 'the consensus of culture' (Foucault 2011: 189) from within.

Here, I would like to pause to consider an important tension that emerges in Foucault's work on parrhesia and Cynicism. If we accept that parrhesia requires a relationship based on mutual understanding, but that Cynical parrhesia has a fundamentally anti-cultural function, two criteria are necessary for Cynical parrhesia to succeed. The interlocutor must know or trust the parrhesiast enough to willingly accept the parrhesiastic agreement, and must value and understand the anti-cultural criticism

proffered. In other words, there must be (a) a carefully navigated relationship and (b) a pre-existing shared Cynical attitude. As we will see, in the forthcoming encounters, neither are present. As a result, artists are seen to have failed to use their privileged positions as vocal public provocateurs to speak meaningfully in the interest of the majority, instead turning their attention to genres of criticism intelligible to and valued by a small clique of fellow initiated artists. What we find flourishing in the wake of bad parrhesia, then, is a relationship between artist and audience characterised by humour, confusion and withdrawal.

That being said, the key contribution of this paper is to argue that a bad parrhesiastic encounter does not yield the absence of a social relationship but a relationship of an 'anti-social' (Højer 2019, 2004) kind. Højer's (2004) analysis originates in an ethnographic account of the Mongolian concept of *hel am*, a category of diffuse danger carrying 'connotations of dispute' and 'powers of harm' or 'misfortune' (2004: 50). Højer demonstrates that *hel am* is a "creative" principle working for disintegration ... not just negatively working for the integration of society' (2004: 52). To account for such categories, Højer argues, we require a theory of relationality that makes space for qualities other than mutuality, reciprocity or togetherness. Against the assumption 'that you can take each other's point of view', Højer re-centres forms of 'avoidance', 'enmity', 'suspicion', 'withdrawal' and 'indifference' as active relational forms (2004: 61).

Not only is the 'anti-social contract' a productive corrective to the Durkheimian assumption that sociality is principally characterised by mutuality. It is also a concept through which I aim to contribute to anthropological debates about Cynicism, parrhesia and northern liberal democracy. Ethnographies of parrhesia and Cynicism have situated it as a form of possessive individualism and corrosive to intersubjective relations (Englund 2018), or as a reaction against the ironies of liberal democratic politics (Boyer 2013). In order to make sense of my particular case, a slight adjustment is required in each case.

In his ethnography of free speech debates on Finnish radio, Englund (2018) describes a series of confrontations between public-service broadcasters and bigoted listeners. Englund argues that these debates stem from disagreements regarding the relationship between voice, truth and the subject: for public-service broadcasters, truth is constituted intersubjectively through dialogue, while for bigoted listeners, internal truths are expressed via a singular, fearless voice. Englund contends that listeners' commitment to self-expression is akin to Foucault's parrhesia, which he defines as characterised by a tight, proprietary bond between the parrhesiast and inner truths, and counterposed to intersubjectivity. In my case, I recentre another aspect of parrhesia that Foucault emphasises: the skill required to navigate the parrhesiastic relationship. Arguably, what Englund's and my case share is a focus on bad parrhesia. These are instances in which the expression of incontinent truths clumsily compromises the relationship between parrhesiast and interlocutor. In describing these as instances of bad parrhesia, then, I focus attention on the ways in which what counts as worthwhile public criticism is subject to active contestation. I also aim to highlight that bad parrhesia may compromise public discourse while nonetheless actively generating intersubjective relations, if relations of an 'anti-social' variety.

Second, in Boyer's (2013) ethnography of Reykjavik's satirical 2010 mayoral campaign, he describes the campaign's Cynical parrhesia and satirical humour as a reaction against the ironic distance between the liberal value of multi-vocality and the

dominance of a narrow range of liberal ideologies and elite actors. Yet Boyer does not draw attention to the factors that mitigate against a person appreciating or understanding the Cynical attitude. In this respect, he perhaps underemphasises the secondary factors that influence whether a person is likely to acknowledge or value publicly visible forms of critique, which can become just as homogeneous and entrenched as those liberal ideologies against which they are a reaction. In my case, the Cynical attitude does not invite the audience into a playful critical relationship but closes the door to critical engagement. This is because the Cynical attitude is not only unfamiliar and unvalued by audiences; it is also seen as less subservient to the expression of difficult truths than to artists' commitment to nurturing a position of rebellious distinctiveness.

Nevertheless, as we will see, artists' tendency to engage in bad parrhesiastic expression remains an intelligible reaction to a conundrum artists face in the contemporary Irish arts sector. In what follows, I explore the contextual factors that have laid the groundwork for these 'bad' parrhesiastic encounters. I situate the anti-social character of artists' work against the backdrop of two shifts in city planning and artistic production, and I explore the relationship between status and the limitations of Cynicism as a critical stance.

## The anti-social turn in the creative city

Since the 1990s, European art has experienced a drift away from its historically anti-cultural function. Two factors have contributed to this sea change. First, 'the social turn' in contemporary art has heralded a global rise in 'participatory' work: art that treats social life as its subject matter and stages social situations designed to leave participants with a sense of heightened belonging, empowerment or togetherness. This genre sees the artist less as auteur than co-author, or even, where deprived communities are targeted, quasi-social worker. Though it has received ardent criticism, 'participatory' art continues to dominate the European art sector (Bishop 2012, 2005). Simultaneously, there has been a swell in 'culture-led' urban development policies, with the 'creative city' model among the most familiar. Championed by Richard Florida (2003), the 'creative city' approach capitalises on the capacity for creative labourers – artists, designers, tech workers – to attract an upwardly mobile consumer base to urban areas. This development model was pioneered in North America but has been widely applied elsewhere (Peck 2005). The 'social turn' has meant that contemporary artists are trained to produce precisely the sort of community-oriented artwork 'creative city' advocates are eager to platform. However, for artists critical of the social turn, this alliance has signalled the inoculation of art's critical function. Culture-led development models involve an overt repurposing of bohemianism as a tool for kick-starting economic growth (McGuigan 2009: 293). They also frequently deploy legions of precariously employed artists to patch over gaps in social services (Bishop 2012: 14). The anti-cultural function of the artist has thus been explicitly folded into urban policymaking and dominant modes of cultural production.

'Creative' and 'culture-led' development approaches have been applied with enthusiasm in Dublin and featured centrally in the state's response to the recession, during which time artists were earmarked as key 'creative' allies in Ireland's return to economic prosperity. Under the auspices of a variety of policy programmes – the Creative Dublin Alliance, Creative Ireland, the Percent for Art Scheme – artists have



been encouraged by the government and the Dublin City Council to reinvigorate vacant sites with temporary collectives, pop-up exhibitions and studios. However, policies that nominally emphasise 'creativity' and 'community' have predominantly repackaged existing models of entrepreneurialism in the interest of a small network of actors (Lawton et al. 2010). Moreover, the sites targeted for regeneration are often derelict buildings in 'blighted' neighbourhoods in the city centre, or on the sites of recently demolished social housing estates, where quick-fix 'creative' projects have been demonstrated to exacerbate existing inequalities (O'Callaghan and Lawton 2016).

If we step back and consider these factors, we can understand why critically minded artists might have a high tolerance for bad parrhesiastic encounters, even if it means giving oxygen to anti-social relations. The confluence of contemporary art's 'social turn' and the 'creative city' model has meant that 'anti-social' art appears to be the only way to preserve art's 'anti-cultural' edge. More than this, to refuse to appeal to this participatory genre is about expressing solidarity with those communities that experience public art projects not as an innocuous source of entertainment, but as, in the words of one artist, a 'mercenary ... mechanic for the ruling class'. Ironically, however, it is precisely this turn toward 'anti-social' art and antinomian lifestyles that presents a hurdle to establishing easy relationships with audiences.

It should be noted that the subject matter of this paper is not the relationship between artistic labour and class. This is a complicated subject that I address elsewhere. Indeed, a vast literature attests to the challenge of characterising artists' working lives in straightforwardly classed terms (e.g. Bain and McLean 2013; McRobbie 2011; Menger 1999). For the purposes of this analysis, it is significant that artists benefit from social status in at least one sense: they enjoy roles as politically valuable cultural producers, which allow them to court the ear of the powerful and impact public consensus. As Heather's remark in the opening vignette attests, there was a sense that uninitiated audiences, especially in gentrifying neighbourhoods, did not have the same access to or awareness of artistic genres of cultural production and criticism – in Heather's words, they weren't 'cultured enough'. Foucault's reflections on the relationship between prestige and parrhesia helps us understand why: the parrhesiast is definitionally a person who has achieved sufficient status to be deemed a socially valuable purveyor of difficult truths and to be granted a politically sanctioned platform for critical expression. Artists undoubtedly enjoyed this role, yet audiences often thought artists had indulgently squandered their position, engaging in forms of abstruse cultural production at the expense of establishing mutual understanding.

My interest in these encounters is a reflection of their prevalence in neighbourhoods like the one in which I lived, which I call Mount Stevens. I spent nine of twelve months of fieldwork living on a public-private row on the backside of the recently demolished site of one of Dublin's most controversial social housing estates. An area that housed several blocks of tenements in the early years of the Republic, Mount Stevens is historically working-class. More recently, it has been subject to renewed regeneration efforts. When I arrived, I rode in on the heels of a recent flush of hip cafes and arts spaces, with one artist's residency appearing adjacent to the demolished estate. In addition to spending time in Mount Stevens, I participated in twice-weekly workshops at two state-funded institutions in central Dublin, interviewed artists in dance, theatre, visual and performance art sectors, and spent innumerable hours attending shows in 50-odd studios, collectives, theatres and galleries. The artists I interviewed were those regularly encountered via involvement in these institutions. In neighbourhoods like

Mount Stevens, where artists were newcomers, perceived class differences did exacerbate the factors that mitigate against the establishment of the parrhesiastic relationship. However, class differences were neither straightforward nor predictive of whether the artist would fail to establish a shared critical relationship with his/her audience.

What was more significant, to audiences of varying socio-economic backgrounds, was whether the artist was perceived to have misused their privileged status. The concept of Cynical parrhesia helps us understand *both* why artists critical of the 'social turn' have returned to more antagonistic forms of public spectacle, *and* why the same critical attitude has rendered their art opaque, humorous or unpleasant to uninitiated audiences. The Cynical attitude leaves artists in a catch-22. It allows them to manifest a vaguely polemical attitude *vis-à-vis* city planners, investors and curators keen to mobilise 'participatory art' as a temporary stopgap for a lack of social services in gentrifying areas. Yet it also means that artists appear to be 'outside' or 'against' those communities on whose behalf they abstractly see themselves as producing polemical 'anti-social' art. I return now to an ethnographic account that makes this clear.

## A performative intervention

Shortly after arriving in Dublin, I participated in a performance art workshop at a state-funded institution I call Meeting House. Several artists – professional and amateur – attended classes run by visiting performance artists. I participated in these and a culminating open show, staged in a cavernous studio with two-storey ceilings, three white walls, and a 20-metre-long bay of modernist windows looking out onto a public park and social housing estate.

During the first half of the performance, those of us who attended the workshops staged a 'performative intervention'. The second half showcased a practitioner of a genre of avant-garde dance that involves making microcosmically slow, hyper-controlled, extemporaneous movements. In its most evocative form, it is meant to so powerfully convey extreme physical and emotional states that the performance establishes a strong connection between audience and artist. Because of the slow pace of movement, however, it is difficult to appreciate for the uninitiated.

Both parts of the performance proved enigmatic. Five minutes before the start of the show, the workshop participants were told that the premise of the piece was to explore whether our 'performance presence' could so move the audience that it would transcend the intersubjective divide created by the command, *Sssh!* After mounting an increasingly enthusiastic effort at silencing each other, we would gradually shift the 'tone' of the *Sssh!* to a palliative one, to 'open' ourselves to the audience. We were permitted to interact with the audience – aggressively or gently – until the point at which the lead performance artist began to pace up and down the studio. This would be our cue to successively lie prostrate on the floor 'at whatever moment we felt was right' until the room was silent.

Any doubts we had about the performance were confirmed immediately. As one performer began overturning chairs and bodychecking members of the audience, a growing sense of trepidation settled over the crowd. With the exception of a few charitable attendees, most were irritated and confused, and a few responded with outright animosity. When we broke for intermission, most people seemed genuinely relieved to be released from the studio.



Over a table brimming with wine and snacks, I spoke with Jakub. A Polish street dancer who normally trained with his crew, and who lived near me in Mount Stevens, he had attended free training sessions in an adjacent studio during the workshop. I invited him to the show, and he eventually – reluctantly – purchased a ticket. When I asked him what he thought of the performance, he congratulated me for what he somewhat transparently described as ‘a very *interesting* piece’. It didn’t take much probing for him to politely concede that it ‘really wasn’t his sort of thing’, before joking that the free alcohol and crisps had at least made his 12-euro ticket ‘somewhat worthwhile’. We spent the intermission chatting about the piece, as we knew each other best of anyone else in the crowd. Jakub’s jibes were good-natured, but there was also a serious discomfort he seemed eager to express: he was not happy to be at the show, or to have paid for it, and was deeply sceptical of the exclusive social setting in which we gathered. As we returned to the studio for the second half, he grabbed a handful of breadsticks and stuffed them hungrily into his mouth, winking at me as he swilled his second glass of complimentary wine and pocketed a muffin.

Back in the studio, the audience was tense. We returned to find the chairs rearranged in a half-circle around the front half of the otherwise empty space. After everyone had taken a new seat, the lights faded, leaving only the halogen-glow of the streetlamps outside to weakly illuminate the room. A prolonged prefatory silence settled before a single spotlight beamed against the back wall, revealing a figure who had silently entered in the darkness. The performer’s body was muscled and androgynous. He was wearing a semi-transparent, gold, dishevelled dress, with a thick layer of white face paint obscuring his face, and a head of long dark hair veiling his chest and back. Moving painstakingly slowly, the figure slid down the wall, face held mask-like in a distorted expression. Within seconds, sweat was beading down the dancer’s forehead from the sheer effort it required to gradually fall, as if in defiance of gravity, to the floor, and to crawl animal-like down the stage toward the audience.

What was in certain respects an impressive performance most thoroughly tested the audience’s forbearance when, 20 minutes into the show, the performer began slowly stroking his genitals. He continued to do this for several long minutes to the tune of a series of guttural sounds. There were a few cautious snickers, but most onlookers remained utterly still, at a loss for how to respond to such an aggressively taboo-breaking performance.

By the end of the 45-minute piece, Jakub was unmistakably vexed. A patchy applause broke out, with a handful of the performer’s followers giving a standing ovation. Jakub refused to applaud entirely. Instead, seated in the centre of the front row, he folded his arms firmly across his chest and shot furious sideward glances at everyone in the room, deploying his entire bulk in defence of the ‘common sense’ I would discover he saw as lacking in the ‘self-indulgent, unintelligible’ performance. As we left the building, he didn’t mince his words, describing the piece as ‘basically bullshit’, there to entertain ‘well-to-do hipsters’ whose interest was piqued by the illusion of having encountered intellectual art, arbitrarily designated as such, or so Jakub would have it, largely in terms of its lack of coherence. He was not alone in his scepticism. As the artists that hosted the workshop congratulated fellow performers, those who hadn’t come to see a friend left the room quickly and in silence.

At least part of this was due to the fact that the majority of the performers, and a large contingent of the audience, were more informed than your anonymous viewer about the aims of the show. I, for instance, had spent the last two days becoming familiar

with participants and the visiting artists' 'performance philosophy'. Throughout the workshop, they emphasised the importance of 'making contact' with viewers. Ideally, then, I knew our mentor hoped that the taboo-breaking display would 'bridge the gap' between the performer and audience and invite attendees into a shared critical encounter. As one artist put it, ideally, it would be 'suddenly not about you, but about a group of people', who might then 'question assumptions about accepted social behaviour'. Yet the performance never became convincing to anyone other than those already sympathetic to, or aware of, its aims.

However, I was as external as Jakub to the second half of the performance. While I had developed respect for the artists, I spent most of the performance alternating between fighting off sleep and making a last-ditch effort to shore up anthropological curiosity. The strong sense of bewilderment I felt was only compounded by the enthusiasm other attendees expressed after the fact. As Jakub and I left the room, a group of artists – dressed in black clothing and silk kimonos – exchanged effusive praise. One spoke of feeling on the verge of tears, while another remarked, with no irony, 'There was just something so *true* about it. It was absolutely beautiful.'

The analysis I present here is an attempt to take this latter assessment at face value, and to reconcile it with the difficulty someone like Jakub might have at feeling the same way, despite sharing a certain kind of relation. As the above vignette attests, the same taboo-breaking spectacle could be experienced as a jarring manifestation of beauty and truth for some, and as the ultimate demonstration of pretence for others. In this case, the degree of familiarity with the artist and the work clearly influenced the likelihood that the piece would be charitably received. Moreover, this fact seemed to indicate to viewers like Jakub that the success of the work depended less on its coherence than on a pre-established understanding and value for these taboo-breaking spectacles. This appreciation would be learned by artists who circled through the sector's institutions and networks, and who would have imbibed a predisposed appreciation for this brand of difficult, provocative public display. Jakub's biting comment about the performance being a recital of pseudo-intellectualism for 'well-to-do hipsters' can thus be read as both an expression of his scepticism of the cogency of the work, and a comment on the role access to privileged social networks plays in conditioning an audience member to value it.

However, these bombastic public provocations remain difficult to explain as solely a result of artists' commitment to inner truths or an expression of proprietary individualism. The artists' self-described performance philosophy placed great emphasis on the establishment of critical relations with others. Ideally, they evidently hoped that the uncomfortable spectacle would nonetheless be so moving that it would jar the audience into a shared critical realisation: of the arbitrariness of the norms the performance sought to challenge. This was, of course, frequently too high a bar to clear for the uninitiated. Yet the peculiarity of Cynicism is that even where artists did not succeed in establishing a parrhesiastic relationship, the Cynical attitude was capacious enough to meaningfully integrate the anti-social relations that would result. The Cynical artist would see the audience's hostility, outrage or hilarity as evidence of the courageousness of the work. Artists' historical role as structural 'outsiders' (Simmel 2011), and their dedication to the 'anti-cultural' function of art, thus meant that artists frequently viewed aggressive social spectacles and difficult interpersonal relations as central to the Cynical attitude. To make this clear, I turn to an account of an archetypally eccentric artistic persona. My aim is to examine how even artists' highly distinctive and sometimes challenging personalities are an extension of their commitment to Cynical

parrhesia and difficult to understand extricated from the 'anti-social' relations within which they are mobilised.

### **At The Black Rose**

After Jakub and I left the performance, we stopped for an airing of grievances over a pint in a nearby venue, The Black Rose. It was here that I met Cú. Jakub knew Cú through his involvement in a group of street theatre performers squatting in a vacant dormitory but hadn't expected to see him. Just before we were planning to head home, Cú walked in the door and changed the course of the evening entirely.

Cú was an intentionally conspicuous presence, his self-styled militant aesthetic jarring with the mainstream street clothes worn by everyone else at the venue: news-boy cap and army-green trench, vintage bum bag slung jauntily around his hips, mud-spattered high-top sneakers hastily laced, and a surprisingly expensive-looking, professional recording device strapped around his wrist. Even his unusual name was a pseudonym he had chosen for himself. A shortened version of the name of a mythical hero from the Ulster Cycle, it refers to a masterful warrior who is prophesied to win notoriety under his new epithet, Cú Chulainn.<sup>1</sup>

After inviting Cú to our table, Jakub introduced me and my research and suggested that Cú sit down with me at some point for an interview. Cú responded by propping his microphone up on the rim of his long-empty beer bottle. Swivelling around on the bench, he asked, in a spot-on parody of the polished air of a news reporter, 'What better time than now?'

My attempts at ethnographising my interlocutors were commonly rebuffed by attempts to absurdly ethnographise me back, in a cheeky bid to invert the anthropologist-interlocutor relationship. This conversation was no exception. As would become clear, Cú constantly carried his recording device to 'collect the ambient sounds of the city', an ongoing project he used to guide his diffuse plan of irregular theatrical interventions and urban roving. Between collecting audio recordings of his psychogeographical jaunts, he and his street theatre troupe would dress in second-hand suits and tail weekend shoppers, mimicking their gait with exaggerated silly-walks and assembling outside café windows to somewhat ominously surveil Dubliners sharing tea and cakes in the city's Cultural Quarters. That day, however, Cú's mind was on fleshing out his audio archive, to which I was destined to become another contribution. I spent the next hour listening to Cú's interpretation of arcane Marxist and anarchist texts, with Jakub sitting silently next to us, tapping his foot mindlessly on the leg of the table, and Cú asking as many questions as he answered. In retrospect, the thudding rap ballads reverberating from the concert space next-door might have made the recording indiscernible. But I persevered, hoping it might offer compelling material to reflect on later. I would never see any evidence of that recording again.

In fact, I would only come across Cú once more, and his re-emergence would be as fleeting and dissonant as our first encounter. Despite assurances that he would send me the recording, the only evidence I have of our conversation is a crumpled Ladbrokes betting slip with a goodbye note scrawled in dulled pencil, signed 'in love and solidarity', the last line containing only his cell number. After several attempts at getting in

<sup>1</sup> This is a pseudonym of a pseudonym, chosen for consistency with the artist's chosen pseudonym.

touch, I eventually received a cryptic message, in which he expressed his commitment to an upcoming experimental programme of isolation that would require our forestalling contact, and his retaining the copy of our conversation.

I did not expect, therefore, to run into Cú three weeks later at an artisanal food market in one of Dublin's well-heeled seaside suburbs. Cú was no longer wearing his distinctive trench and cap, but was sporting a striped nautical jumper, his arms laden with bags of organic vegetables. When I approached to say hello, he seemed sheepish, swiftly explaining that he was visiting his parents, who, it transpired, lived up the road. After Cú deftly extricated himself from the encounter, I received an earful from my friend, Julia, who had accompanied me that day. As we ambled back to board the commuter train into the city, she fumed about 'the hypocrisy' of seeing him in a 'hip' and well-moneyed neighbourhood, chalking his appearance in the expensive green grocers up to an indictment of his 'radical chic' lifestyle: 'For him, politics is just a fashion statement.'

Cú largely went dark afterward. I did eventually learn from an acquaintance that he had been evicted from his eighth squat that year and wasn't communicating with people outside the building except by payphone. But he stood out as archetypal of the kind of interaction I would have with artists for whom art, life and politics had converged in a nexus of social isolation and personal idiosyncrasies. This fact, while a source of frustration for the anthropologist, is significant. It points to the fact that anti-social behaviours – withdrawal, hostility and opacity – are active social forms that require relations with others to come to fruition. It is also indicative of a prevalent but not altogether lauded feature of artistic lives: that they sometimes involved the cultivation of difficult or eccentric personalities that came across to strangers as evidence of pretention. As Julia's reaction implied, perceived refusals to make oneself intelligible or accessible did not just produce a relational vacuum but actively generated frustration and biting humour – often at the artist's expense. These artists were seen to have become too absorbed in cultivating an 'artistic life', one others suspected was less about a fidelity to uncomfortable truths and more the distinction that comes with uniqueness and eccentricity.

Yet to argue that artists let their commitment to the self, or expressing truths, out-strip their investment in establishing relations with others would in this case obscure the central feature of artists' Cynical attitude: that it is precisely in difficult relations with others that they manifest their antinomianism. In a final text I received from Cú, he contextualised his distant demeanour of some months previously. His mind, he explained, had been preoccupied with that evening's ensuing events: a few hours later, he would cook a sort of symbolic last supper for his parents, in which he would summarily announce that he wanted to be cut off from all family communication and financial support indefinitely. After this – seemingly true to his word – Cú disappeared into the network of Dublin's squats and I was unable to reach him. Regardless of what one might think of Cú's decision, it is evidence of the centrality of *others* to his manifestation of the Cynical attitude. There was a testimonial quality to how Cú approached relationships: as if he was duty-bound to live via a series staged demonstrations of the possibility of aggressively inverting the norms of polite society. Everyone he met – the anthropologist, Jakub, his parents, Dublin's weekend shoppers – were targets for the manifestation of this antinomianism. Through comic stunts, tactical evasions, drunken filibustering or overt hostility, he would leave his interlocutor with a sense that they had encountered a person swimming upstream. Yet like other artists, Cú took up this

style of existence as an aggressive but earnest invitation to others to question the terms of everyday social life. That this invitation might fail, and anti-social relations result, was par for the course.

As should be clear, fail they often did. That artists' Cynical parrhesia was neither familiar nor valued was evident in tragicomic encounters with sceptical audiences. Shortly before meeting Cú, I attended a show staged in the bottom floor of an unfinished luxury apartment block in Dublin's financial district, at the heart of a regenerated working-class neighbourhood in the docklands. Dressed in muted monochrome, and horse-shoed in by well-dressed, attentive millennials, the artists offered an embodied performance of their experience of the economic crisis. Dumping water over their heads and fiendishly tearing film reel out of old cassette tapes – to the tune of Celtic Tiger-era policy programmes sung out in chorus – they seemed eager to get across something of the anxiety of the post-recession years. I was seated at the edge of the crowd, adjacent to a wall of partially installed windowpanes. Toward the end of the piece, one performer began frantically polishing the windows. As her scrubbing reached a fever pitch, two construction workers rolled up to the bay of windows outside the semi-completed building, their curiosity piqued. Shielded from the torrential rain under the roof of their digger, and warming their hands with two cups of steaming coffee, they laughed raucously at the concluding scenes of the piece, apparently unnoticed by the rest of the crowd.

## **Re-centring status in the anthropology of parrhesia**

This paper has focused on encounters between artists and sceptical audiences. Drawing on Foucault's theory of the artist as modern Cynic, I have deployed 'bad parrhesia' as a tool for understanding both why artists take up the Cynical attitude and why their public provocations fail to move audiences. As I argue, the intersection of the 'social turn' in contemporary art and 'culture-led' development models has pushed critically minded artists toward 'anti-social' forms of public spectacle. However, artists do not always successfully establish a shared critical relationship with audiences, nor do audiences always recognise or value artists' Cynical stance. Artists are thus judged to have misused their privileged positions as pedestalled cultural critics: instead of achieving mutual understanding, and expressing intelligible courageous truths in the interest of the majority, they are thought to have dedicated their energy to the production of esoteric cultural objects recognisable and worthwhile to a closed coterie of other artists.

Throughout, I have framed 'bad parrhesia' as a window onto considering how we might theorise social relations not characterised by mutuality, reciprocity or understanding. In so doing, I aim to contribute to the salutary push toward theorising 'anti-social' forms (Højer 2019, 2004), as well as to productively weigh in on debates about the relationship between Cynicism, parrhesia and liberal democracy. Anthropological accounts of European parrhesia have posited that it relies on an understanding of speech and expression as the property of the liberal individual, a subject position counterposed to relationality, multivocality and dialogue (Englund 2018). However, I argue that artists' iconoclastic forms of public provocation are less the result of a commitment to inner truths than of their dedication to the artist's role as structural 'outsider' (Simmel 2011). It is precisely within the 'anti-social' relations that follow the 'bad parrhesiastic' encounter that artists manifest the Cynical attitude. Yet this does

not prevent audiences from finding artists indulgent, obtuse or humorously pretentious. In this sense, the above account also points to the limits of Cynical parrhesia as a critical stance, which may be less appealing or intelligible in social settings in which it comes across less as a form of risky truth-telling than as a marker of misused status (cf. Boyer 2013).

The latter fact has wider ramifications for anthropological understandings of the politics of critique in the liberal democratic public sphere. In his work on parrhesia in post-recession Iceland, Boyer (2013) explains the rise of Cynicism and satire in Euro-American public culture as a reaction against a contradiction. Even as liberalism promises to platform multiple critical voices, liberal democratic states are dominated by a narrow range of centre-left ideologies and the interests of a small network of elite actors. There is reason to read my case in similar terms. Owing to the convergence between participatory art and the creative city model, the historically anti-cultural function of art has been absorbed into a constrained field of political practice and public discourse, against which artists are reacting.

However, such an analysis presumes that highly public Cynical critical responses to moments of cultural crisis are accepted and valued by members of the democratic public who enjoy less visibility or power over cultural consensus. In the encounters detailed in this paper, artists' Cynical parrhesia provokes another brand of criticism we should not overlook: from sceptical audiences who call into question the pretensions with which artists broach this cultural impasse. In framing parrhesia not as a form of self-expression but a contested *relationship*, then, I aim to re-centre ethnographic disagreements regarding which forms of public criticism are judged to be available and to whom. In this sense, the above account attests to the importance of keeping status differences in view in analyses of contestation in the public sphere, an angle that has thus far been less salient in the promising swell of anthropological literature on parrhesia and public criticism in northern liberal democracies.

## Acknowledgements

This paper was written with the support of the ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship, Grant Number G108269. It is an evolved product of a paper given in a panel entitled 'The roads to freedom? Liberal grammar in translation' at the 2018 conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). My conference attendance was funded by the Cambridge Trust Conference Fund. I would like to thank fellow panel participants, and the editors of this Special Section, for facilitating the generative discussion that led to publication. I would also like to thank Vita Peacock, Fiona Wright, Kelly Fagan Robinson, Joe Ellis and two anonymous reviewers for insightful critical feedback on earlier drafts.

Natalie Morningstar   
Department of Social Anthropology  
University of Cambridge  
Cambridge CB2 3RF  
UK  
ncm40@cam.ac.uk



## References

- Bain, A. and H. McLean 2013. 'The artistic precariat', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 6: 93–111.
- Bishop, C. 2005. 'The social turn: collaboration and its discontents', *Artforum* 44: 178–83.
- Bishop, C. 2012. *Artificial bells: participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. London: Verso.
- Boyer, D. 2013. 'Simply the best: parody and political sincerity in Iceland', *American Ethnologist* 40: 276–87.
- Candea, M., J. Cook, C. Trundle and T. Yarrow (eds.) 2015. *Detachment: essays on the limits of relational thinking*. Manchester: University Press.
- Coleman, L. 2009. 'Being alone together: from solidarity to solitude in urban Anthropology', *Anthropological Quarterly* 82: 755–77.
- Englund, H. 2018. 'The front line of free speech: beyond parrhesia in Finland's migration debate', *American Ethnologist* 45: 100–11.
- Fedirko, T., F. Samanani and H. Williamson 2021. Grammars of Liberalism, Social Anthropology.
- Florida, R. 2003. 'Cities and the creative class', *City & Community* 2: 3–19.
- Foucault, M. 2011. *The courage of truth: (The government of self and others II): lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, F. Gros (trans.) and G. Burchell (ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. 2019. *Discourse and truth and Parresia*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Højer, L. 2004. 'The anti-social contract: enmity and suspicion in Northern Mongolia', *Cambridge Anthropology* 24: 41–63.
- Højer, L. 2019. *The anti-social contract: injurious talk and dangerous exchanges in northern Mongolia*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Lawton, P., E. Murphy and D. Redmond 2010. 'Examining the role of "creative class" ideas in urban and economic policy formation: the case of Dublin, Ireland', *International Journal of Knowledge-Based Development* 1: 267–86.
- Marar, Z. 2014. *Deception*. New York: Routledge.
- McGuigan, J. 2009. 'Doing a Florida thing: the creative class thesis and cultural policy', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15: 291–300.
- McRobbie, A. 2011. 'Re-thinking creative economy as radical social enterprise', *Variant* 41: 32–3.
- Menger, P.-M. 1999. 'Artistic labor markets and careers', *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 541–74.
- O'Callaghan, C. and P. Lawton 2016. 'Temporary solutions? Vacant space policy and strategies for re-use in Dublin', *Irish Geography* 48: 69–87.
- Peck, J. 2005. 'Struggling with the creative class', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29: 740–70.
- Simmel, G. 2011. *On individuality and social forms*. Chicago, IL: University Press.

## Mauvaise parrhésie

Cet article examine les limites de la « parrhésie cynique ». Sur la base d'un travail de terrain dans la ville de Dublin en poste-récession avec des artistes activistes, je décris leurs efforts difficiles pour utiliser une expression artistique aventureuse afin de provoquer un éveil critique dans un public d'étrangers, qui répond au contraire avec dérision. Je me concentre donc sur une caractéristique étroite mais répandue du travail et de la vie des artistes, ainsi que sur l'expérience du public face à des styles de critiques publiques provocantes : la rencontre avec l'inintelligibilité et l'aliénation dans la sphère publique. Je déploie donc la « mauvaise parrhésie » comme un outil permettant d'examiner les facteurs qui empêchent les artistes d'établir la relation critique souhaitée avec le public. Néanmoins, bien que ces rencontres parrhesiastiques ne réussissent pas, je soutiens qu'elles ne débouchent pas sur une absence de relations sociales, mais sur des relations plutôt « antisocial ». S'écarter des lectures de la parrhésie comme une forme d'individualisme, corrosive pour la rationalité, ou une réaction ludique contre les échecs de la politique démocratique

libérale, je plaide pour encadrer la parrhésie comme une relation de contestation sur les types de critiques publiques qui sont jugées comme des réponses intelligibles et valables aux moments de crise culturelle dans les démocraties libérales du Nord.

**Mots-clés** parrhesia, art, cynisme, démocratie libérale, critique